Telephone interview with Peter Kessey, former hospital corpsman who served in Indochina and participated in "Operation Passage to Freedom--1954. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 21 August 2003.

Where are you from?

I was born and raised in Port Arthur, TX. I went to high school there and left there in '51 to join the Navy. I came back to Port Arthur after I got discharged in March of '55 and went to work as a delivery boy for a pharmacist, then worked at the Gulf refinery because they were paying more money. The refinery had a summer hiring program for college students. I wasn't in college yet but was fixing to go. I then enrolled in the University of Texas in September of '55, went 1 year, and then left and went over to Laos. I was out of school for a year.

When you joined the Navy, where did you go to corps school?

Portsmouth, VA. I was in the third 20-week class to go through Portsmouth. I had gone to boot camp in San Diego. There were four corps schools operating at that time, one in San Diego, one in Great Lakes, one in Bainbridge, MD, and one in Portsmouth.

I got on a train in San Diego on a Sunday night, rode it to LA, where we got on a Pullman car. There were 16 of us in that draft and we stayed on that car for 6 days and 6 nights all the way across the United States and ended up in Newport News. We then got on a Navy bus and rode it to the Naval Hospital in Portsmouth. The Hospital Corps school was on the grounds of the Naval Hospital.

I graduated from the school on the second day of November, 1951 and got sent down to Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune. I spent 21 months there. I spent a year on the wards; I paid my dues.

Which wards did you work on?

I was on Ward 26 which was a medical ward. That included two 30-day tours of night duty. After I made third class, I was eligible to go to a special department and went to work in the pharmacy. That was the best deal yet. I think I worked about 9 months in the pharmacy. Then I got transfer orders in June of '53 to go to Naval Hospital Yokosuka, Japan. I spent 13 months there. That was back in the days when things were cheap over there.

Is that where they eventually assigned you to the ship?

My enlistment was getting ready to expire; I was within 6 months and they needed some help on those ships down in Vietnam. They were transferring all those refugees from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.

Do you remember about when that was?

It was September of '54 when I transferred out of Yokosuka. They put us on a refrigeration ship, the USS *Aludra* (AR-9). They needed some warm bodies for help because they were loaded up and they had to replenish some of the ships in the Formosa Straits. We left out of Yokosuka and went down through the Formosa Straits, replenished the ships there, and ended up in Subic Bay. That's where they dropped me off because that's where the *Calvert* was and that's where I was being transferred. The *Calvert* was a converted luxury liner. The Navy had bought the thing at the first part of the war and converted it to an APA, (APA-32). In the regular APAs, the sick bay was on the first deck and you had portholes to see outside. The sick

bay on the *Calvert* was on the second deck and below. If you had the duty, you didn't see daylight for 24 hours. I wasn't a very happy camper on the *Calvert*. I had been living the life of Riley there in Yokosuka and then we got transferred to the ship. But that's the way things go.

Where did the *Calvert* go then, to Haiphong?

Yes. We left Subic and went to Haiphong. We then sat in the harbor there in Baie d'Along. We were anchored there. Haiphong was some way up the Red River. Dooley came aboard one day and saw me. I had met him in Yokosuka.

What was your impression of him when you first met him?

I thought he was full of shit. My opinion didn't change all along. When I got to Yokosuka, the civilians who worked there were on strike. There was a bunch of us who had been transferred from the hospital in Camp Lejeune. So they put most of us to work in the dining hall pushing chow carts and things like that. I worked there for a couple of months and then made second class petty officer. They had an opening in the chaplain's office for a chaplain's assistant so worked there for most of the time I was there in Yokosuka.

Is that when you met Dooley?

I was sitting in the chaplain's office and Dooley came busting in one day and introduced himself and said that he wanted to see the Catholic chaplain. I told him he wasn't in. He then said, "I have a piece of the original cross Jesus was crucified on." He said it was given to him by the pope. I didn't have any reason not to believe the man. When we were over in Laos there was a guy by the name of Harry Kaufman who worked for the United States Overseas Mission and he thought that was funny. He said, "If somebody took all the pieces of the original cross they would have a structure about 120 feet high and a cross bar about 50 feet wide. That's when I met Dooley. He went to work on an orthopedic ward or something. He wasn't an orthopedic man so I don't know why the hell they put him on that ward. All he knew about orthopedics is what he learned in medical school. He didn't get along too well with people around there because he was so outgoing. Old Dooley used to spread a lot of stories about what he did. He told us one time that his middle name was Anheuser. The T. A. Dooley--Thomas A. Dooley. The A was for Anheuser. His mother, Agnes, was one one of the Anheuser girls. Well that was bullshit. The A was for Anthony. He supposedly knew all the big shots in St. Louis where he grew up. He claimed that his daddy was the one who invented the exploding rivet. Now I don't know whether that's true or not but he spread a lot of stories around.

What kind of physician was he?

As far as I know, he was very efficient in what he had to do. He wasn't a quack that I know of.

How did you get the orders to go to Haiphong?

As I said, they put us on this refrigeration ship as passengers and took us to Subic Bay to pick up the *Calvert*. I got on the *Calvert* and was assigned to the sick bay. From there we went to Touraine. It's now called Danang. Then we went up to Haiphong.

Dooley had been shipped out of Yokosuka and been assigned to an AKA named the *Montague* (AKA-98). He got transferred from there ashore because he could speak French and they needed a medical person ashore there in Haiphong to be the head of a preventive medicine

unit. None of us were preventive medicine types but he was charged with holding sick call there taking care of the refugees. We also had to go out there once or twice a day and run this machine that would make potable water for the refugees to drink.

Anyway, Dooley recognized me and asked me if I wanted to work for him. As I said, I wasn't a very happy camper on the damn *Calvert* so thought this would be more exciting than being on that damn ship. So Dooley got me off of there and assigned TAD [temporary additional duty] with his preventive medicine and sanitation unit at the refugee camp in Haiphong. We were berthed on an APD called the *Balduck* (DE-716) It was tied to a buoy in the middle of the Red River across from the French navy base there in Haiphong. We slept and ate there and had to go ashore every day and do our duties at the refugee camp and go back to the ship at night.

Was that the camp named La Pagode?

Yes. There were three refugee camps. One was situated in a rice field and another was in an old soccer field. The third one was closer to town. I had nothing to do with that one. When the refugees were transported from Haiphong down to Saigon, we had to process them. We had machines to dust them with DDT.

These refugees were in pretty tough shape, weren't they?

It wasn't much different from the way they were already living. They lived in tents and they had their water vessels and cooking equipment. There was no dining or mess hall facility. Everyone was responsible for cooking and eating their own food. They weren't out in the open; they were sheltered in tents. We had to supervise them while they dug slit trenches for a place for them to relieve themselves. Sometimes they'd just go outside the tent, squat down, and do their business. Then we'd have to go around with a canister of lindane to spray all these piles of human excrement to keep the flies away. A lot of the stuff Dooley talked about in his book . . . He didn't do all that.

Do you mean he was exaggerating?

Yes, sir. He exaggerated. A lot of the stuff he claimed he saw, we didn't see. The guys with the chopsticks in their ears and all that stuff; I never saw that.

He described a woman who had thorns pushed into her head by the communists.

He had a tendency to exaggerate.

So, working for Dooley wasn't necessarily a pleasant experience.

He got a big charge out of jumping onto somebody about something or another. Of course, they ended up kicking him out of the Navy for being a homo. Of course, I didn't find this out until a long time after that. He had never made any advances toward me so he was all right. The Navy Hospital Corps was full of "sissy boys," if I can use the term. That kind of work appealed to them. As long as they left me alone and didn't bother me, they were all right. They made very efficient hospital corpsmen. I just kind of overlooked the whole damn thing. When he called me in Christmas of 1955, he told me all kinds of stuff of how he was going to go to Laos and have a medical team and he wanted me to come along because I was an ex corpsman. We were supposed to have two jeeps and a trailer and we'd go from village to village giving medical care. They had roads over there but there weren't enough of them. We went to Vientiane and stayed there for awhile then flew up to northern Laos.

You had agreed to go to Laos with Dooley?

Well, I wasn't doing too good in school. I was in Port Arthur for Christmas when he called me. He then called me the following April. That was in '56. He told me the trip was on and he still wanted me to go along with him. I said okay. I figured I needed to get out of school for awhile. That's when I told him I'd go along.

Do you remember Dennis Shepard?

Yes. I was going to give you his name and ask if you wanted to talk to him. He's an ophthalmologist in Santa Maria, CA. He and his wife have their own eye hospital out there.

Was Shepard with you at Haiphong?

No. Denny and I were in the Navy at the same time but I did not know him at all when we were in the Navy. The first time I met him was in August of '56 when we all met out in San Francisco to go to Laos.

I want to take you back to that unit you were with in Haiphong. Could you describe what the preventive medicine unit looked like?

We were in a building on the French navy base. We had a refrigerator and some supplies in there but we didn't stay around there and do any medical work at all. Everything we did was out in the refugee camp.

What was a typical day for you?

We'd go ashore to the French Navy base in a landing craft. We had an old Dodge pickup that was our transportation. We'd then go out to the refugee camp and run the machines that cleaned the water and added chlorine.

Did they just pull the water out of the rice paddies?

Right out of the rice paddy. The water was potable but didn't taste too damn good. They had a chlorinator. There were a couple of rubber tanks. Sometimes you'd get there in the morning and find that someone had cut the rubber tanks with a knife. They held about 500 gallons, if I'm not mistaken.

The climate must have been very hot and humid.

It got kind of chilly up there. This was in the fall and I didn't leave there until early February.

Did you have much contact with the French while you were up there in Haiphong?

Dooley did. There were French colonial troops and they were from Senegal--Africa. Because Baker could speak French, got in real tight with the French cooks. Every now and then we'd go there and get something to eat at the mess hall on the French navy base. We did that about four or five times while I was over there. I couldn't have too much contact with them because I didn't speak French.

What was the security situation? Was there still trouble between the French and Vietminh in the vicinity or were things pretty quiet?

I never got shot at. There was a curfew. Some nights when we were able to sleep on the French navy base but they cut that out. They wanted us to sleep on the ship. After working hours, we'd put on civilian clothes and go out to a French restaurant on downtown Haiphong. That was the only restaurant I knew of at the time.

What did Haiphong look like to you?

They had permanent buildings. The French had built the place up and most of the streets were paved. There were some nice houses that the French lived in. It didn't look Vietnamese. It looked like civilization.

But you didn't get much chance to wander around.

No I didn't. They didn't want anyone to get into trouble so they kept us on the Navy base or on the ship. We would have gotten into trouble if they had known we had gone into town at night. It was all work. The guys on the ship were restricted to the damn ship--period. Every now and then they'd have a party of about 12 or 14 guys that they'd take ashore for a sightseeing trip around Haiphong and then take them back to the ship, just for a change of scenery.

In December of '55 another APD--I think it was the *Cook*--came up and relieved the *Balduck* and allowed it to go down to Saigon for R & R. Baker stayed up there in Haiphong but they let me go with the ship on this R & R trip down to Saigon. It took us a couple of days to get down there and we stayed there for 5 or 6 days anchored in the river.

When you were treating the refugees in the camps, what kind of diseases were you seeing?

I had damn little to do with the medical treatment of the refugees. Dooley did it all because we had other things to do. We could have helped him out but we didn't have a clinic at the refugee camp. He brought along his own medical supplies. And he had his own transportation. He did his own thing. But we did some of the dirty work like making the water and spraying the poop piles, and supervising digging trenches and things like that. I can't tell you that much about the condition of the sick refugees.

Were you there when they began moving the refugees out on ships?

Most of that happened before I got there. Once or twice we loaded refugees to be transported. We went to a place called the Brick Factory. There was a wharf there on the river and that's where a French landing craft was used to transport those people from the Brick Factory up the river to one of the ships in Bae d'Along. Twice we had to process refugees, using the machines to spray them with DDT. We sprayed their possessions and put it in their hair. I often think about that; they wouldn't allow that to be done today. I had nothing else to do with their transportation from Haiphong down to Saigon.

When did you leave Vietnam?

It was the end of January or the first of February of '55. They put me aboard another APA which was supposed to take me to Subic Bay but they went to Hong Kong first. We spent a few nights there and then we went to Subic Bay. I was there for about 3 days and then went to Clark Air Force Base where I got a plane to Hawaii, and then to Treasure Island, California, where I was discharged at the receiving station on the first day of March.

I understand that after you left the Navy you joined the reserves.

I was out 9 years and needed a part-time job. When I looked into the Navy reserves, I found out that they would take me back as a second class, the same rank I was discharged with. I joined in ‘64 and ended up retiring in ‘92 as a master chief hospital corpsman.